Concrescence: Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research

Vol. 3, No. 3, 2026, E-ISSN: 1595-9287

# Dancing the Algorithm: AI and Indigenous Dance Storytelling in Nigeria

**Philip Chijioke Izunegbu**

*Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin,*
*Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria*
*philip.izunegbu@arts.uniben.edu*
*chijiokeizunegbu@gmail.com*

***Abstract***

In Nigeria, indigenous dance is much more than entertainment; it is a way to record history, share morals, and connect with ancestors through the body. For a long time, these dances were performed in village squares, where the community would gather to participate in the story. Today, however, these dances are often shared on social media, where their visibility is controlled by computer programs known as algorithms. This research looks at how these digital platforms change the way Nigerian dance is told. While these apps allow dancers to reach millions of people worldwide, they are designed to prioritize quick, popular content to make money, rather than to preserve deep cultural meaning. This creates a problem: to fit into the "short and fast" style the algorithm prefers, dancers may have to break their long, meaningful rituals into small, disconnected clips. This can strip the dance of its original soul, context, and history. By studying the Ohafia War Dance, this paper shows how the body now has to perform in both the ancestral world and the digital one. It argues that for these stories to survive, dancers must learn how to use these digital tools carefully. They must find ways to stay visible online without losing the important, sacred meaning of their heritage.

**Keywords:** AI, Indigenous dance, Algorithms, Performance

## Introduction

In Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape, indigenous dance has never been merely a display of physical agility, nor is it simply idle entertainment meant to pass the time. Long before the imposition of colonial languages and the widespread adoption of the written word, the moving body served as a primary, living archive for communities across the continent. Indigenous dance is an advanced system of epistemology; a way of knowing, recording, and transmitting the profound realities of human existence. Through the intricate synchronization of specific steps, the deliberate isolation of body parts, polyrhythmic musicality, and deeply symbolic gestures, Nigerian communities have successfully encoded their myths, documented historical triumphs and tragedies, imparted moral lessons, and sustained spiritual beliefs. The dancer, in this context, is not just a performer but a historian and a storyteller, carrying the weight of the community's collective memory within their muscles and bones. Kariamu Welsh-Asante rigorously articulates this foundational concept, noting that African dance operates fundamentally as an "artistic, historical and philosophical inquiry" (3). It is a highly organized language that reflects the complex worldviews, social structures, and aesthetic values of the people who perform it. When a dancer steps into the communal circle, they engage in a philosophical discourse on the nature of the universe, the relationship between the earth and the divine, and the bonds that hold society together. The curvature of the spine, the grounding of the feet into the

earth, and the dynamic interaction with the drum are all deliberate narrative choices. These aesthetic markers do not exist in isolation; they are deeply intentional tools used to narrate the human experience. Therefore, to understand Nigerian indigenous dance is to understand the very heartbeat of its people's history.

The storytelling embedded in these dances is not a static relic of a bygone era, nor does it merely exist in the fleeting moment of physical performance. Instead, it functions as a vital bridge spanning across time, intimately connecting the living, breathing community to its revered ancestors. African indigenous dance thrives on continuity. As Welsh-Asante further explains, these movement traditions are passed "from the ancestors to the present," ensuring that historical memory not only survives but actively participates in the contemporary lives of the people (12).

When a traditional dance is taught and learned, it is not merely a transfer of choreography; it is an initiation into a lineage. The dancer embodies the spirits and the lived experiences of those who danced the same steps centuries prior. For instance, dances that mimic the movements of local fauna or reenact the strategic maneuvers of ancient warriors are potent narratives that teach youth about survival, bravery, and ecological balance. The physical exertion required to master these dances acts as a forge, binding the individual to the collective identity. In this way, storytelling through dance is an active, ongoing process of communal survival. It is an insistence that the ancestors are not dead but are actively conversing with the present generation through rhythm and kinetic energy.

The narrative power of indigenous dance is inextricably tied to the social and political realities of the community. Dance does not occur in a vacuum; it takes place within a specific spatial and social context that is highly charged with meaning. Biodun Jeyifo insightfully argues that African performance arts, particularly in their theatrical and danced forms, are inseparable from cultural politics (45). The arena of dance is a highly visible communal stage where social identities are continually negotiated, power dynamics are openly questioned, and shared moral values are either strictly affirmed or playfully subverted.

In many Nigerian traditions, the dance arena is a democratic space where even the most powerful leaders can be subject to critique through satirical movement and song. Storytelling in this context becomes a tool for social regulation. A dance might tell the story of a corrupt leader who met a tragic end, serving as a visceral, undeniable warning to current titleholders. Conversely, dance can serve as a profound unifying force, particularly in post-colonial Nigeria, where reclaiming and celebrating indigenous movement is a potent political statement against the historical erasure of African cultures. By insisting on the validity and beauty of their own choreographic narratives, Nigerian dancers engage in an ongoing cultural politics that demands recognition and respect on their own terms. The body in motion becomes a site of resistance, sovereignty, and deep cultural pride.

Recognizing the immense philosophical, historical, and political value of these dance traditions, global institutions have increasingly taken steps to document and protect them. The threat of globalization, urbanization, and the passing of elder master dancers has created an urgent need to preserve these ephemeral arts. Platforms and repositories such as the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage database and the Smithsonian Folkways Music and Dance Archive have stepped in to catalog numerous African dances, recording their histories, musical accompaniments, and cultural significance (UNESCO; Smithsonian Institution). These institutions play a critical role in safeguarding against the total erasure

of these practices. By conferring international recognition upon indigenous dances, they validate the importance of these forms on a global stage.

However, a fundamental tension exists between the institutional archive and the lived experience of the dance. While audio recordings, written descriptions, and archival video footage are essential for historical record-keeping, they possess inherent limitations. An archive captures a single, frozen iteration of a dance, stripping it of its immediate communal context, the smell of the earth, the spontaneous interaction between the drummer and the dancer, and the participatory energy of the surrounding crowd. An archived dance is, in many ways, a silent story. For the narrative to remain truly alive, a dance must be continuously breathed into, practiced, and adapted by living bodies within its native cultural ecosystem. It must remain a dynamic, evolving storytelling medium rather than a static museum exhibit.

Today, the survival, transmission, and evolution of these indigenous stories have found a profoundly new and expansive stage: the digital space. The contemporary landscape of Nigeria is characterized by rapid technological advancement, with widespread access to smartphones, affordable mobile data, and immense participation in social media platforms. The traditional village square, once the undisputed epicenter of cultural performance, has dramatically expanded into a borderless global network. Young Nigerian dancers, traditional cultural troupes, innovative choreographers, and cultural researchers are increasingly turning to their device cameras to record indigenous movements, thereby sharing Nigerian cultural stories with an audience of millions worldwide. This digital turn represents a monumental shift in how cultural narratives are disseminated. A traditional dance that was once confined to a specific geographical region during a specific seasonal festival can now be viewed, shared, and studied by individuals across the globe in real-time.

This unprecedented digital visibility offers incredible opportunities for cultural promotion, education, and the dismantling of monolithic stereotypes about African performance. It allows local storytellers to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and broadcast their heritage directly to the world. Yet, this newfound digital visibility is far from neutral. The platforms that host, distribute, and popularize these videos, such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, are driven by highly complex, proprietary artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms. These algorithms are not designed to preserve cultural heritage or honor the deep philosophical inquiries embedded in indigenous dance. Instead, they are meticulously engineered with a singular, primary objective: to maximize user engagement and generate advertising revenue.

Consequently, the AI algorithm has rapidly emerged as the modern cultural gatekeeper of our era. It determines, with mathematical coldness, which dances are pushed to the forefront of millions of screens and which are suppressed in the digital shadows. To appease the algorithm and achieve "virality," content must often conform to specific structural demands: it must be short, fast-paced, visually highly stimulating, and immediately digestible.

This algorithmic demand creates a profound friction with the very nature of indigenous storytelling. Traditional Nigerian dances often rely on extended duration to build spiritual energy, complex polyrhythms that require deep listening, and subtle, localized gestures that demand deep cultural literacy to understand. When an indigenous dancer attempts to translate these profound narratives into a fifteen-second digital format, what is lost in translation? This shift raises critical, urgent questions about the future of indigenous storytelling in the 21st century. When a deeply significant traditional Nigerian dance is

filtered through the opaque lens of an AI algorithm, does it retain its ancestral narrative power, or is it inevitably flattened into a disconnected, easily consumed viral trend? Does the algorithm force the dancer to alter their movements, effectively changing the story to satisfy the machine?

This paper argues that while artificial intelligence and digital algorithmic platforms offer unprecedented global visibility and new avenues for the circulation of Nigerian indigenous dance, they simultaneously act as powerful, unseen gatekeepers that threaten to strip these movements of their original storytelling context, philosophical depth, and cultural politics. By critically examining this complex dynamic between the ancient moving body and modern machine learning, we can begin to understand how indigenous bodies are actively navigating the new digital landscape. Ultimately, this research seeks to uncover what it truly means for the African storyteller to "dance the algorithm," balancing the urgent desire for cultural visibility with the vital need for narrative integrity.

## Theoretical Framework

To understand how Nigerian indigenous dance survives in the age of artificial intelligence, we must bridge the gap between two seemingly opposing worlds: the physical, ancestral world of Performance Studies and the mathematical, data-driven world of Algorithmic Culture. This section builds a bridge between the human body and the machine, using the theories of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner to explain the "soul" of the dance, and those of Ted Striphas, Safiya Noble, and others to explain the "logic" of the digital platforms that now host these cultural expressions.

Richard Schechner, a pioneer in Performance Studies, defines performance not as a random act but as "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior" (Schechner 28). This means that every time a dancer performs, they are not creating something from nothing; they are re-animating a sequence of movements that has been practiced, refined, and passed down through generations.

In Nigeria, this is clearly seen in the Ohafia War Dance (Ikpirikpi Ogu). The Ohafia people of Abia State have a history rooted in warrior culture. In the past, the dance was performed to welcome heroes back from real battles. Today, the dancers are not literal soldiers, but they are “restoring” the behavior of their ancestors. When they vibrate their chests (ikpa obi), leap with precision, and carry the symbolic “cutoff head” trophy, they are engaging in a physical storytelling process. Schechner argues that performance exists on a continuum that ranges from ritual (focused on results and tradition) to entertainment (focused on the audience and fun). The Ohafia War Dance sits perfectly on this line. It is a ritual because it honors the spirit of the Ohafia ancestors, but it is also a performance because it is designed to be seen, admired, and used to instill pride in the community. By “behaving twice,” the dancer ensures that the history of the people is not forgotten but is literally “re-membered” through the body.

Victor Turner’s work takes us deeper into what happens inside the circle of the dance. Turner describes a state called liminality, which comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “threshold” (94). A liminal state is a “betwixt and between” period where a person is no longer who they were before the ritual, but they haven’t yet become who they will be after. When a dancer puts on the traditional Oyaya headgear and the George cloth for the Ohafia War Dance, they enter this liminal space. For the duration of the performance, they are no longer just ordinary citizens of modern-day Nigeria living in the year 2026. They become vessels for the warrior spirit. In this sacred space, the normal rules of society, like wealth,

status, or job titles, disappear. What emerges is a phenomenon Turner calls communitas (45).

Communitas is a feeling of intense, spontaneous togetherness and equality. When the community gathers to watch the Ohafia War Dance, the shared rhythm of the *akwatankwa* (wooden gongs) creates a heartbeat that everyone follows. The boundary between the performer and the observer thins. This feeling is the "social glue" of indigenous storytelling. It is not just about watching a show; it is an embodied experience where the entire community feels part of the same ancestral story. Without this physical presence and shared energy, the dance loses its primary function as a tool for social bonding.

The conflict arises when this physical, communal ritual is moved from the dusty village square to a glass smartphone screen. This move enters what Ted Striphas calls Algorithmic Culture. Striphas argues that the word "*culture*" is used to refer to the work of human beings, our traditions, arts, and habits. Now, however, culture is increasingly managed, sorted, and even "thought" by machines (Striphas 396). In the traditional setting, the "*gatekeepers*" of the Ohafia War Dance were the elders, the master drummers, and the community members who decided if a performance was authentic. In the digital world, the gatekeeper is an algorithm. An algorithm is a set of mathematical instructions used by platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to decide which content should be promoted and which should be hidden.

Tarleton Gillespie points out that these algorithms are not neutral; they are "powerful intermediaries" that shape what we know and how we see our own culture (Gillespie 167). If an algorithm is programmed to favor "fast" content, it may ignore a slow, meaningful traditional ritual. This means the machine is now making "cultural judgments" based on data rather than on the value of the story being told.

To understand why the algorithm behaves this way, we must look at the work of José van Dijck and Shoshana Zuboff. Van Dijck explains that we have moved from a "social" world to a "Culture of Connectivity" (van Dijck 4). In this digital culture, every "Like," "Share," and "View" is a data point. The goal of the platform is not to promote Nigerian heritage for its own sake; it is to keep users scrolling. This is what Shoshana Zuboff calls Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff 8). Under this system, the "story" of the Ohafia War Dance is treated as "raw material" to be turned into data.

The algorithm doesn't care about the bravery of the Ohafia ancestors; it only cares that the video has high "retention." This creates a massive tension. Turner's communitas is about real human connection and spiritual depth, but the digital platform is about connectivity, a machine-led process designed for profit. When the Ohafia War Dance is posted online, it is no longer just a story of a people; it is a piece of content competing for attention in a global marketplace.

A major concern in this framework is whether these algorithms are biased. Safiya Noble, in her book Algorithms of Oppression, argues that search engines and social media algorithms often reinforce racial and cultural stereotypes (Noble 15). Because most AI models are trained on data from Western countries, they may not "understand" the aesthetic language of African indigenous dance. For example, the sharp, percussive movements of the Ohafia War Dance might be flagged by a poorly trained AI as "aggressive," or the algorithm might simply fail to recognize the technical skill involved because it doesn't look like "ballet" or "hip-hop." This leads to what Noble calls *algorithmic marginalization*, where indigenous

stories are pushed to the bottom of the feed because they don't fit a *Western-centric standard* of what is entertaining or beautiful (Noble 15).

### Indigenous Dance as Storytelling in Nigeria: Ohafia War Dance Performance

In the traditional Nigerian worldview, the human body is not merely a biological entity; it is a profound site of cultural inscription. To dance is to engage in a form of "embodied literacy," where the dancer reads the history of their people through their muscles and writes it into the air for the community to witness. As Martin Banham emphasizes, African performance is characterized by a "total" aesthetic, a seamless fusion of history, spirituality, social regulation, and artistic innovation (Banham 2). Within this framework, dance functions as a primary repository of knowledge. In a society where history was traditionally oral and performative, the "moving story" replaced the "written book."

Every rhythmic stomp, every deliberate pause, and every tilt of the neck serves as a sentence in a larger communal narrative. For the Nigerian, dance is the highest form of social documentation; it is how a community remembers who they are and asserts who they intend to become. This storytelling is rooted in what Oyin Ogunba describes as the "ritual theatre" of the people (Ogunba 1978). In the village square, the dance is a communal dialogue. It is a pedagogical tool, a way of teaching that ensures the philosophical underpinnings of the culture are not just heard but felt.

This "Total Theatre" creates a space where the past and the present collide. When the drums sound, the linear progression of time is suspended. The dancer is no longer just a modern individual; they become a bridge across the ancestral continuum. This is particularly evident in the Igbo tradition, where the dance arena becomes a sacred space for "transfiguration," a moment where the human performer mimes the divine or the historical to ensure the continuity of the lineage (Ogunba 2000). The resilience of this storytelling medium lies in its adaptability. Dapo Adelugba argues that Nigerian theatre is a "dynamic movement" (Adelugba 12). It is not a stagnant relic but a living, breathing response to the environment. Whether the story is told in the context of a pre-colonial war, a colonial struggle, or a modern festival, the dance evolves to remain relevant.

The Ohafia War Dance is perhaps the most visceral example of kinetic storytelling in Southeastern Nigeria. Originating from the Ohafia people of Abia State, the dance is a physical archive of a people defined by their martial prowess. Originally, the dance was integral to the warfare cycle. It was a "welcome home" ritual performed when warriors returned from battle. Traditionally, the measure of a warrior's success was the "trophy" he brought back, often a symbol of a fallen enemy's head. As society transitioned toward modernity, the literal violence of warfare was replaced by the symbolic "violence" of art. The "heads" became carved wooden replicas, and the dance moved from the battlefield to the festival stage. As Adelugba suggests, the "dynamics" of this movement allowed the Ohafia to preserve their warrior identity without engaging in literal combat (Adelugba 72).

The storytelling of the Ohafia War Dance is found in its specific, non-verbal grammar. Every part of the performer's body contributes to the narrative:

a. **The Costume (Oyaya and George Cloth):** The lead dancer wears the Oyaya, an elaborate headpiece adorned with leopard skin and symbolic skulls, representing the burden of leadership. The "George" wrapper provides freedom for the legs while maintaining a dignified, strong look.
b. **The Chest Vibration (Ikpa Obi):** This rapid, percussive vibration of the chest muscles is a narrative of the "internal heat" (Akanri) that drives a warrior. It signifies the adrenaline,

the courage, and the spiritual fire required to face an adversary. It tells the viewer: "I am ready."

c. **The Lead Dancer's Mime:** The dancer moves with a predatory, crouching gait. He mimes the act of tracking an enemy through a forest. This is a story of strategy over brute force; it reminds the community that a true warrior is patient and observant.

d. **The Rhythmic Dialogue:** The music, led by the akwatankwa (wooden gongs), provides the "syntax" of the performance. The drums "speak" to the dancers, giving instructions for when to advance and when to celebrate.

### Digital Circulation: From the Village Square to the Global Screen

In 2026, the "village square" has expanded into a global, digital network. Through social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, the Ohafia War Dance is experiencing a "digital circulation" that reaches millions instantly. The Conflict of Algorithmic Logic, as Ted Striphas warns, the algorithm is now the cultural gatekeeper (Striphas 396).

a. **Fragmentation:** On digital platforms, the dancer has 15 to 30 seconds to be "viral." This leads to fragmentation, where the "slow" parts of the story (the tracking and the strategy) are cut out, leaving only the "explosive" parts (the chest vibration). The story of discipline is replaced by the story of the hook.

b. **Algorithmic Bias:** If an AI model, trained primarily on Western dance forms, doesn't "recognize" the technical skill of the chest vibration, it may not promote the video. This leads to what Safiya Noble calls "algorithmic marginalization," where indigenous stories are suppressed because they don't fit the machine's idea of "entertainment" (Noble 15).

c. **Loss of Context:** When a sacred ritual appears on a phone between a comedy skit and a food advertisement, the "liminality" or sacredness described by Turner is broken. The viewer becomes a passive consumer of a "clip" rather than a participant in a story.

### Artificial Intelligence and the Digital Circulation of Dance

The emergence of digital media and Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed the production, circulation, preservation, and reception of indigenous dance in Nigeria. Traditionally, Nigerian dances such as the Ohafia War Dance, Atịlọgwu, Ekombi, Egedege, and various masquerade performances existed within ritual, communal, and ceremonial spaces where meaning was created collectively through participation, symbolism, music, costume, and oral tradition. Dance was not merely movement for entertainment; it functioned as storytelling, historical preservation, social education, and spiritual communication. However, the rise of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube has shifted indigenous dance from the village square and festival arena into algorithm-driven digital spaces where visibility is increasingly controlled by computational systems.

Richard Schechner argues that performance extends beyond the stage into ritual, social behavior, communal interaction, and cultural identity (Schechner 28). In African societies, dance therefore functions not simply as aesthetic movement but as embodied cultural memory. Similarly, Victor Turner explains that ritual performances are deeply connected to communal identity and symbolic meaning because they create what he calls "social drama," where communities negotiate values, beliefs, and relationships through performance (Turner 21). This understanding is particularly important in Nigerian indigenous dance traditions where movement often carries historical and symbolic meanings that cannot be separated from their social contexts.

For example, the Ohafia War Dance of southeastern Nigeria historically emerged from warrior traditions among the Ohafia people of Abia State. The vigorous chest movements, coordinated footwork, and symbolic gestures within the performance communicate bravery, masculinity, communal defense, and ancestral memory. Similarly, Atịlọgwu dance among the Igbo combines acrobatic movements, music, drumming, costume, and storytelling to celebrate youthfulness, vitality, and communal identity. These dances are therefore narrative systems through which communities preserve memory and identity across generations. As Oyin Ogunba observes, African performance traditions are inseparable from ritual and communal participation because drama, music, dance, and spirituality operate together within what later scholars describe as "total theatre" (Ogunba 3).

The digital circulation of these performances introduces new opportunities and new tensions. Today, indigenous dances are no longer limited to physical audiences within their local communities. Through smartphones and social media platforms, performances recorded in Lagos, Enugu, Calabar, or Benin City can reach audiences across Europe, America, and the African diaspora within minutes. José van Dijck notes that social media platforms have transformed culture into a system of "connectivity" where visibility is determined through digital engagement such as likes, comments, watch time, and shares (van Dijck 11). In this digital environment, algorithms increasingly determine which performances gain visibility and which disappear into obscurity.

Ted Striphas describes this condition as "algorithmic culture," a situation in which computational systems participate actively in shaping cultural tastes, visibility, and participation (Striphas 396). In the context of Nigerian indigenous dance, this means that algorithms are no longer passive technological tools; they now function as cultural gatekeepers. The visibility of a dance performance on TikTok or Instagram often depends less on its cultural depth and more on whether the platform's algorithm considers the content engaging enough to sustain audience attention. Consequently, performances with fast-paced movement, dramatic editing, bright lighting, or spectacular acrobatic elements are often prioritized over slower symbolic or ritual dances.

This has important implications for indigenous storytelling. Traditionally, the meaning of dances such as Ekombi or masquerade performances depended heavily on context, costume, music, ritual preparation, and communal interpretation. However, once these dances enter digital spaces, they are often reduced to short clips optimized for algorithmic circulation. Tarleton Gillespie argues that digital platforms increasingly function as "custodians of the internet" because they determine what users encounter online through automated recommendation systems (Gillespie 168). In effect, algorithms influence not only what audiences watch but also what performers create. Nigerian dancers seeking visibility may therefore begin to adjust choreography, costumes, pacing, and presentation to satisfy algorithmic preferences rather than cultural requirements.

This process contributes to what may be described as the "TikTok-ification" of indigenous dance. Performances are shortened, simplified, and edited for virality. Symbolic or ritual dimensions are often removed in favor of spectacle and entertainment. A masquerade performance uploaded online, for instance, may attract attention because of its costume aesthetics or unusual movements, while the spiritual and communal meanings underlying the performance remain absent. Martin Banham notes that African performance traditions operate through a fusion of music, dance, ritual, audience interaction, and symbolism (7).

When these elements are fragmented for digital consumption, the dance risks losing part of its narrative and pedagogical function.

The influence of algorithms also affects choreography itself. Algorithms reward repetition, predictability, and high engagement. As a result, dancers may unconsciously modify traditional movements to fit digital expectations. For instance, highly acrobatic sections of Atịlọgwu performances may receive greater algorithmic visibility than slower ritual gestures because they generate more audience reactions online. Over time, this creates what scholars of digital culture call homogenization, in which diverse cultural expressions gradually become standardized to fit platform logic. Safiya Noble argues that algorithmic systems are never neutral because they reflect the cultural assumptions embedded within their design (Noble 5). This means that dances that do not align with dominant digital aesthetics may receive limited visibility regardless of their cultural significance.

Issues of cultural bias also emerge within AI systems themselves. Machine learning systems are trained using datasets, and these datasets often prioritize Western movement traditions such as ballet, ballroom dance, or commercial hip-hop. Consequently, AI systems may struggle to interpret indigenous African dance movements that rely on polyrhythmic coordination, grounded movement, improvisation, or symbolic gesture. Research on machine learning for dance motion analysis demonstrates that AI systems frequently encounter difficulties classifying movement patterns that fall outside dominant training data ("Machine Learning for Dance Motion Analysis"). In practical terms, this means that Nigerian dances may become digitally marginalized because the systems designed to recognize and promote movement were not trained using African performance vocabularies.

The problem extends beyond visibility into questions of meaning and representation. AI technologies such as motion capture and computer vision analyze dance by converting human movement into measurable data points, coordinates, and skeletal structures. While such technologies are useful for choreography analysis, animation, rehabilitation, and dance preservation, they also risk reducing embodied cultural knowledge into abstract computational information. Melanie Mitchell argues that AI systems remain limited in their ability to understand context, emotion, symbolism, and human meaning because intelligence cannot be separated entirely from cultural experience and interpretation (Mitchell 214). A computer system may successfully detect the speed, angle, and rhythm of the Ohafia chest vibration, but it cannot fully interpret the historical memory, warrior symbolism, or communal identity embedded within the movement.

This limitation is especially important within African performance traditions, where meaning often exists beyond physical movement. Kariamu Welsh-Asante explains that African dance embodies philosophical, spiritual, and communal principles rather than functioning merely as entertainment (Welsh-Asante 15). Movement therefore, carries cultural codes that cannot always be translated into numerical data. The danger is not simply technological misunderstanding but cultural reductionism. When indigenous dance becomes primarily understood through analytics, engagement statistics, and algorithmic visibility, storytelling risks becoming detached from its cultural roots.

Despite these concerns, digital circulation also creates important opportunities for preservation and cultural exchange. UNESCO recognizes performance traditions as forms of intangible cultural heritage requiring preservation across generations. Digital archives, online performances, and social media documentation can therefore help preserve dances that might otherwise disappear due to urbanization, migration, globalization, and declining

intergenerational transmission. Through YouTube archives and Instagram documentation, younger generations within the diaspora can encounter Nigerian dance traditions even when physically distant from their communities.

Digital media also enables new forms of intercultural dialogue. Nigerian dancers increasingly collaborate with performers across Africa, Europe, and North America through online platforms. This creates what Victor Turner describes as new forms of communitas, where shared performance practices generate social connection beyond geographic boundaries (Turner 96). During cultural festivals and online dance challenges, indigenous Nigerian movements are often fused creatively with Afrobeats choreography, contemporary dance, hip-hop, and global popular culture. While such hybridization may generate concerns about authenticity, it also demonstrates the adaptability and continuing relevance of indigenous performance traditions.

However, the economic structure of digital platforms introduces another challenge. Shoshana Zuboff argues that digital capitalism transforms human behavior into data that can be monitored, predicted, and monetized (Zuboff 94). Within this system, indigenous dances become not only cultural expressions but also digital commodities generating views, clicks, and advertising revenue for platforms. Performers may gain visibility, but the platforms themselves often benefit most economically from the circulation of cultural content. Questions therefore emerge concerning ownership, consent, and cultural exploitation. When traditional performances are uploaded online without adequate context or community permission, sacred or communal knowledge may become commodified for entertainment purposes.

The documentary *Coded Bias* further illustrates how algorithmic systems often reproduce existing inequalities and exclusions. Algorithms reflect the biases of their creators, datasets, and institutional structures. In the context of indigenous dance, this means certain cultural performances may become privileged while others remain invisible. Dances considered visually "marketable" or globally appealing are more likely to circulate widely, while localized ritual forms may receive little attention. Thus, algorithmic visibility increasingly shapes contemporary cultural memory.

To address these challenges, scholars and practitioners must develop more culturally sensitive approaches to digital preservation and AI analysis. First, indigenous communities should maintain greater control over how their performances are represented online. Second, digital documentation should include contextual information explaining the historical, ritual, and symbolic significance of performances. Third, AI researchers must diversify movement datasets to include African performance traditions rather than relying predominantly on Western movement vocabularies. Finally, dancers and cultural practitioners should develop digital literacy skills enabling them to navigate algorithmic systems without sacrificing cultural integrity.

Ultimately, the future of indigenous Nigerian dance within digital culture depends on balance. Technology itself is neither entirely destructive nor entirely liberating. AI and digital media possess the capacity both to preserve and to distort cultural storytelling. The critical issue is whether indigenous communities remain active participants in shaping how their dances are circulated, interpreted, and remembered within algorithmic spaces. As Nigerian dance continues moving from ritual arenas to digital platforms, the challenge lies in ensuring that visibility does not replace meaning and that virality does not erase cultural memory.

Vol. 3, No. 3, 2026, E-ISSN: 1595-9287

## Conclusion

The algorithm functions as a new cultural gatekeeper, deciding which dances are visible, popular, and valued in the digital space. This gatekeeping role brings both promise and peril. On the positive side, AI and digital platforms can preserve, circulate and innovate indigenous dances, connecting communities across the globe. On the negative side, algorithms can distort cultural representation, commodify tradition, displace local authority, and amplify inequities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. By combining digital literacy, community consent, and contextualized presentation, indigenous communities can navigate the algorithm in ways that preserve cultural integrity while embracing the benefits of digital circulation. In this way, AI and digital technologies do not simply threaten indigenous dance; they also provide tools for reimagining storytelling and cultural engagement in the modern age.

## Works Cited

Adelugba, Dapo. *Nigerian Theatre: Dynamics of a Movement*. Ibadan: LACE Occasional Publications, 1964. Print.

Banham, Martin. *A History of Theatre in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

*Coded Bias*. Dir. Shalini Kantayya. 7th Empire Media, 2020. Film.

De La Fuente Prieto, Julián, and César Pérez Herranz. "Comparative Analysis of Digital Practices Related to Cultural Heritage on TikTok and Nostr." *Frontiers in Computer Science* 8 (2026): n. pag. Web. 14 May 2026.

Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Relevance of Algorithms." *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*. Ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014. 167-194. Print. http://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9042.003.0013.

Jeyifo, Biodun. *African Theatre and Cultural Politics*. London: Zed Books, 2002. Print.

Kobis, D.C. "Artificial Intelligence and the Sociology of Folklore: A Comparative Study of Turkey and Indonesia." *Journal of Machine Learning and AI* (2025): n. pag. Web. 14 May 2026.

Mitchell, Melanie. *Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans*. London: Penguin, 2019. Web. 14 May 2026.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press, 2018. Print. http://doi.org/10.1017/9781108999687.011.

Nogueira, Maria Rita, Paulo Menezes, and José Maçãs de Carvalho. "Exploring the Impact of Machine Learning on Dance Performance: A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 20.1 (2024): 60-109. Web. 14 May 2026. http://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2024.2338927.

Nyandieka, B.B. "AI Music Assessment Systems: Algorithmic Marginalisation of Indigenous Ohangla Music." *Journal of Music and Creative Arts* (2026): n. pag. Web. 14 May 2026.

Ogunba, Oyin. "The Place of Drama in Ritual African Theatre." *Dramatic Architectures* (2000): n. pag. Print.

Ogunba, Oyin. *Theatre in Africa*. Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1978. Print.

Opoku-Ware, Kwaku, and Gideon Opoku. "AfroBeats Dance Movement Analysis Using Computer Vision: A Proof-of-Concept Framework Combining YOLO and Segment Anything Model." *arXiv* (2025): n. pag. Web. 14 May 2026. http://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2512.03509.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013. Print. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203125168.

Smithsonian Institution. "Smithsonian Folkways Music and Dance Archive." *Folkways.si.edu*. Smithsonian Institution, n.d. Web. 6 Mar. 2026.

Striphas, Ted. "Algorithmic Culture." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18.4-5 (2015): 395-412. Print. http://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915577388.

Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982. Print.

Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986. Print.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969. Print. http://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134666.

UNESCO. "Intangible Cultural Heritage." *UNESCO.org*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d. Web. 6 Mar. 2026.

Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

Welsh-Asante, Kariamu. *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996. Print.

Welsh-Asante, Kariamu. *African Dance: From the Ancestors to the Present*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998. Print.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019. Print.